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ABSTRACT

To determine what happens to a student's reading interests in an open classroom setting, three studies were conducted into the expressed reading interests of 1,078 first and second grade children in twelve public schools located in the urban and suburban areas of New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles. The children were interviewed individually and were asked initially to draw a picture showing what they would like most to read about or have read to them. In the nation-wide study it was found that first graders were more interested in fiction while second graders were more interested in factual topics. In the study of a first grade open classroom in Culver City, California, the choices of topics reflected a greater interest in scientific material, particularly animal subjects. And in the study of a traditional-turned-open classroom in Glen Cove, New York, it was found that the four topics receiving the greatest degree of preference included three which were categorized as realistic fiction and one categorized as imaginative fiction. It was decided that no clear-cut conclusions as to the influence of open classrooms on the reading interests of first grade children could be drawn from the three studies described. (HOD)

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WHAT ABOUT READING INTERESTS IN THE OPEN CLASSROOM?

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Open classrooms, as described by Wiener (1973), usually have a set of observable characteristics. The classrooms are decentralized; learning centers and tables have replaced desks and chairs. Children are free to move throughout the class, talk to each other, and choose their own activities. Children from different grades may work together either on a visiting basis or on a multi-age graded basis. Decision-making is based upon the contributions of both teachers and children. Children's interests and competencies determine the starting point of activities. The atmosphere is permeated with "openness"--an awareness and a respect toward the whole range of individual differences. The teacher is a facilitator of learning, a resource person, rather than an authority figure.

Current research, as summarized by Wiener, apparently does not ascribe greater reading achievement to the open classroom than to the traditional setting. However, some evidence, such as that of Heimgartner (1972), seems to suggest that a child's self-concept may be increased in an open classroom.

What happens to a student's reading interests, that outcome of experiential background, availability of materials, peer group influence, and self-concept--in an open classroom setting? Does a daily working relationship with older groups react on reading interests, or are they attuned to a framework that is cultural and maturational?

During the spring of 1972 this writer conducted research into the expressed reading interests of 1,078 first and second grade children in 12 public schools located in three population centers of the United States--New York City and suburbs; Detroit and suburbs; and Los Angeles and suburbs. There was an almost equal distribution of first and second graders, as well as boys and girls; the racial-ethnic composition of the sample included black, white, and Spanish-surnamed children. More children were of average reading level and average intelligence than either low or high categories.

Briefly, the children were interviewed individually and were asked initially to draw a picture showing what they would like most to read about or have read to them. Following

completion of the drawing, a structured interview was conducted; the form of the interview was adapted to the specific drawing the child had completed, and the interview was structured so as to elicit the child's general area of reading interest. The drawings and interviews were subsequently distributed into clusters of topics. The topics were then classified according to seven prearranged categories: (1) information scientific; (2) information historic; (3) information 1970s; (4) realistic fiction; (5) imaginative fiction; (6) humor; and (7) poetry. None of the topics selected, however, fell into the category of poetry. These interest categories then became the basis of 17 hypotheses which were tested for statistical significance by Chi-Square.

Findings: Nation-wide Study (1972)

Significant differences ($p < .01$) in reading interests existed between first and second grade children. First graders were more interested in fiction; second graders were more interested in factual topics. The contrast in expressed reading interests between first and second grade children is shown below in Table 1.

First grade children showed interest in 22 topics. Second grade children were interested in 25 topics; 22 were the same as those chosen by first graders. A few children chose more than one topic. Comparison of topic choices of first and second grade subjects disclosed that the 10 most frequent choices of second grade children demonstrated

Table 1

Comparison of Frequency of First and Second Grade Category Preferences, Nation-Wide Study, 1972

	First Grade		Second Grade	
Categories	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Information Scientific	106.5	19.54	134	25.15
Information Historic	11	2.01	17	3.18
Information 1970s	58	10.64	119.5	22.42
Realistic Fiction	209	38.35	108.5	20.35
Imaginative Fiction	146.5	26.89	136	25.53
Humor	14	2.57	18	3.37
Poetry	--	--	--	--
TOTAL	545	100.00	533	100.00

Chi-Square = 58.3143
$p < .01$

a greater interest in factual material than did the 10 most frequent choices of first grade children.

Findings: First Grade, Culver City (1972)

Of the 12 schools participating in the 1972 study, open classrooms, meeting the criteria previously described, were evident only in Culver City, California. Children were housed in an open-space "pod," and although grade designations

were not used, children in the six-to-nine age group (first through third grades) formed a cluster, spending the school day together.

A visual scan of the reading interests of the six and seven year old (first grade) Culver City children appeared to indicate a different order of preferences than those evidenced by the rest of the first grade sample. Chi-Square analysis disclosed there were indeed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) as shown in Table 2 below. The frequency of responses falling in the category "Information Scientific" as well as the similar degree of interest shown in the categories "Realistic Fiction" and "Imaginative Fiction" was similar to the category preferences of the second graders, as evidenced in the national study.

Table 2

Comparison of Frequency of First Grade Category Preferences--Culver City ("Open") with Remainder of Sample ("Traditional")--1972

	Culver City--"Open"		Remainder of Sample--"Traditional"	
Categories	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Information Scientific	19	37.3	87.5	17.7
Information Historic	2	3.9	9	1.8
Information 1970s	4	7.9	54	10.9
Realistic Fiction	12	23.5	197	39.9
Imaginative Fiction	12	23.5	134.5	27.3
Humor	2	3.9	12	2.4
Poetry	--	--	--	--
TOTAL	51	100.00	494	100.00

Chi-Square = 14.3164
$p < .05$

Choices of topics consequently reflected a greater interest in scientific material, particularly animal subjects, in Culver City. Topics chosen by Culver City children of this age group, and the number of children choosing them were: information on animals (13); stories about real animals (9); fairy tales (4); talking animals (4); how to make and/or operate vehicles, etc. (3); monsters and superhuman personalities (3); prehistoric life (3); how things grow (2); funny stories (2); stories about people (2); historic events and famous people (2); chemical and biological information (1); famous contemporary people (1); mystery and ghost stories (1); stories about children (1). Children in the remainder of the 1972 first grade sample made the following choices: stories about children (95); fairy tales (68); information on animals (67); stories about people (48); stories about real animals (40); stories about talking animals (26); how to make and/or operate vehicles, etc. (24); monsters and superhuman personalities (23); vocations (19); TV cartoons (13); funny stories (12); how things grow (11); prehistoric life (9); historic events and famous people (9); information on sports (7); famous contemporary people (5); chemical and biological information (5); current events (5); "How to . . ." information, other than mechanical (3), mystery and ghost stories (2); real-life adventure stories (2).

Findings: Glen Cove Studies (1972-1973)

Included in the first grade national sample during 1972 was a first grade "traditional" class from a school in Glen Cove, New York. In the following 1972-73 school year, the teacher of this class, together with two additional teachers, combined to staff an "open" classroom in the same school, encompassing a first-through-third grade range, with children aged six through nine. The 60 children in the room were almost evenly divided as to sex; I.Q. and reading level were predominantly in the average range; white children constituted 86 percent of the sample with the remaining 14 percent composed of black and Spanish-surnamed children. Only 17 of the children, however, were first graders in the six-seven age range. These 17 children were interviewed during the spring of 1973 as to their reading interests, following the same techniques used previously. These children, representing roughly one-third of the room's population, worked and played all day with older age groupings; all the observable characteristics of an open classroom were evident. When category choices of the 1972 "traditional" group were compared with choices of the 1973 "open" group, no statistically significant differences were found, as shown in Table 3.

Topics chosen by the two groups were similar. Choices made by the first grade children in the traditional setting in 1972 were: stories about children (6); information on animals (4); real-life adventure stories (3); monsters and

Table 3

Comparison of Frequency of First Grade Category Preferences--Glen Cove (1973) "Open" with Glen Cove (1972) "Traditional"

	Glen Cove (1973) "Open"		Glen Cove (1972) "Traditional"	
Categories	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Information Scientific	6	35.29	6	25
Information Historic	-	--	1	4.17
Information 1970s	1	5.88	3	12.50
Realistic Fiction	7	41.18	8	33.33
Imaginative Fiction	3	17.65	5	20.83
Humor	-	--	1	4.17
Poetry	-	--	-	--
TOTAL	17	100.00	24	100.00

Chi-Square = 2.44274
$p > .05$

superhuman personalities (3); fairy tales (2); biology, chemistry, etc. (2); how to make and/or operate vehicles, etc. (1); funny stories (1); prehistoric life (1); vocations (1). First grade children in the open classroom in 1973 chose: stories about people (4); information on animals (3); fairy tales (2); stories about animals (2); dictionary (1); how things grow (1); how to make and/or

operate vehicles, etc. (1); chemical, biological information (1); monsters and superhuman personalities (1); real-life adventure stories (1).

Findings: Glen Cove Studies (1974)

During the 1973-74 school year, the first grade population of the Glen Cove school (used in previous studies) numbered 82 children, 43 boys and 39 girls. Fourteen of the children were black or Spanish-surnamed. I.Q. and reading levels of the grade were predominantly in the average range. Children were housed in three units: 49 children in two self-contained traditional classrooms and 33 children as part of a multi-age open classroom. The open classroom included a kindergarten-through-second-grade range of children, with ages five through eight. The population of the entire open unit was 76 children, so that the 33 first graders (six and seven year olds) constituted the largest part of the unit.

During February and March, 1974, the expressed reading interests of all the first grade children in the Glen Cove school were investigated, using again the techniques previously described. Comparison of the two groups (those in the traditional self-contained classrooms with those in the open classroom) revealed no statistically significant differences, as shown in Table 4.

Children in the open classroom chose fairy tales (8); stories about real animals (6); monsters and superhuman personalities (4); talking animals (3); information on

Table 4

Comparison of First Grade Category Preferences--
Glen Cove "Open" with Glen Cove "Traditional"--
1974

	Glen Cove "Open"		Glen Cove "Traditional"	
Categories	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Information Scientific	2	6.06	2	4.08
Information Historic	-	--	-	--
Information 1970s	5	15.15	6	12.24
Realistic Fiction	10	30.30	22	44.90
Imaginative Fiction	16	48.49	19	38.78
Humor	-	--	-	--
Poetry	-	--	-	--
TOTAL	33	100.00	49	100.00

Chi-Square = 1.79442
$p > .05$

sports (2); stories about children (2); vocations (2); ghosts and mystery stories (1); how things grow (1); how to make and/or operate vehicles, etc. (1); information on animals (1); real-life adventure stories (1); stories about people (1). Children in the traditional classrooms chose stories about children (13); fairy tales (11); stories about real animals (5); stories about people (4); TV cartoons (4); how to make and/or operate vehicles, etc. (3); monsters and superhuman

personalities (3); current events (1); how things grow (1); prehistoric life (1); sports information (1); talking animals (1); vocations (1).

Although some differences in the topics chosen and the order of the choices did occur, both groups showed interest in 13 topics. The four topics receiving the greatest degree of preference for both groups included three which would be categorized as "realistic fiction" and one in the category "imaginative fiction."

Conclusions

No clear-cut conclusions as to the influence of open classrooms on the reading interests of first grade children can be drawn from the three studies herein described.

Significant differences did occur when the preferences of the children in the Culver City open classroom were contrasted with the interests of the other first grade children in the national study. The preferences of the Culver City sample appeared to be closer to the interests of the national second grade sample. Whether these preferences were an outcome of daily relationships with a large group of older children (six and seven year olds were the youngest members of the Culver City group and accounted for approximately one-third of the total enrollment), or whether there were actual curriculum differences, not easily discernible, cannot be resolved.

No significant differences were found in reading interests of first grade children in open and traditional classrooms in either Glen Cove study. In the study indicated in Table 3, the total number of children (17) was small and in the study indicated in Table 4, the first graders were the largest numerical unit, with no third graders and a smaller number of second grade children, as well as a group of kindergarten children, included in the class. Perhaps the influence of the older children was minimal, under these circumstances.

Does an open classroom influence the reading interests of first grade children? Does a school day with a constant work-play relationship with older children help to form reading interests? Or are these interests locked into a maturational-cultural continuum? Perhaps further research will produce more definitive answers.

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